

Do You Have to Let It Linger by [osaki_nana_707](#)

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Summary:

Steve visits his ex-wife for her birthday.

Do You Have to Let It Linger

Author's Note:

Please read the other stories before this one, or this one probably won't make sense. :)

Do You Have to Let It Linger

Steve recalls very clearly when he fell in love with Colleen.

It was sophomore year of college, and he was coming down from his previous year of sexual exploration and trying to keep his grades at a reasonable level. He was about halfway through the semester, running on about four hours sleep, and well on his way to a full-fledged mental breakdown.

He'd been standing in a sudden downpour that had started as he rushed towards his next class, one that he was already late for, and that was when she had appeared, like an angel through parted clouds. She had come up behind him and teetered her umbrella over both of their heads and asked him, "You okay?"

He always did fall in love too easily.

Colleen was a couple of years older than him, working on an Education degree. He'd seen her around school before but never had taken the time to notice her until she was right in front of him, and when he turned around and saw this petite woman with big brown eyes, he felt like he went a little weak-kneed. Her brown hair was knotted on the top of her head, she was in a school sweatshirt and acid-washed jeans, she had a breakout on her chin, and she was fucking *beautiful*. When she smiled at his hopeless expression, he knew he was lost.

They'd both skipped class that afternoon, holing up in a burger joint and just talking while Steve's clothes went from soaked to damp from the rain. Colleen was smart, quick as a whip, and she looked at him

the same way Nancy used to, back when Steve thought she loved him. She didn't call him an idiot though, even though he certainly felt like one, and when they left the restaurant, she made sure to write her phone number on the palm of his hand. She even let him keep her umbrella for the afternoon, claiming he'd have an excuse to see her if he needed to return it later.

Smitten. He was absolutely smitten.

The romance had been kind of a whirlwind, like something out of one of the movies he'd seen with a few of his previous dating partners. Colleen was funny and interesting, and Steve wanted to spend every second with her. He was surprised to find that she actually wanted to spend that time with him too, so they were very seldom apart. They moved in together after a year, and on Colleen's graduation day, Steve asked her to marry him.

She said yes, and Steve thought he could never love someone more than he loved her.

...and then they had Hannah.

Hannah had been err... *unexpected* . Colleen wasn't one to let the pregnancy slow her down though, continuing her work at the local elementary school. She'd always loved children, and Steve had been playing dad with the Nerds for years, so they were at least adequately equipped for it. Steve asked his dad for a stay-at-home job for the company so that Colleen didn't have to stop working, he got to spend time with the most beautiful baby girl he'd ever seen, and everything was *great* . Everything was *perfect* .

Mostly.

Until it wasn't.

That's why it's weird to be standing here now, at the door of Colleen's house in the city, holding a bouquet of flowers. It's her birthday, and Steve thought she'd like to have a day with her daughter, so they've shown up to surprise her and take her to breakfast.

When she opens the door, she's as beautiful as she ever was, and Steve feels himself soften a little at the sight of her. He still loves her a bit, and it drags up that pain. He misses seeing her every day, misses that smile.

"Mommy!" Hannah exclaims, wrapping her arms around her, and Colleen lights up, crouching down to meet her embrace. Hannah starts singing "Happy Birthday" to her as Colleen lifts her into her arms. She is joyous. She is perfect. She is so much more than Steve ever deserved.

"Thank you," she says, and her voice stabs right into Steve. At least it's a needle now, instead of a knife. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes meet Steve's. She looks at the bouquet of daffodils, her favorite, the same flowers she carried down the aisle at their wedding. Steve's eyes water a little. He mentally blames it on the spring air.

"Happy Birthday," he says, handing over the flowers. "Thought we might treat you to breakfast if that's okay."

"That's so sweet," she says, and she sounds genuinely touched. Steve misses that about her too, that genuineness. His inability to open up to her had always made him feel so dishonest.

God, he's always been like this, hasn't he? Deciding things on his own. Keeping them to himself. He never even considered that she might have already had plans. "I-- I probably should have called," he offers lamely, as if that will fix her ex-husband showing up out of the blue with flowers.

He supposes he should at least cut himself a little bit of slack. He's had a lot on his mind lately.

"Don't worry about it, it's wonderful," she assures, stepping aside to allow him into her home.

Her home. Not theirs.

She still has some of the furniture they'd bought together-- the bookshelf, the table lamp. So much more of her exists in this space

now though, and so much less of him. Her decorating is more open, lighter. He'd never cared much what kind of things they purchased as long as she was happy, but he thinks that maybe the clutter of their old lives should have been a sign that she wasn't. He thinks of his relationship with Nancy, how he'd ignored the obvious in the hopes that everything would turn out fine as long as they pretended well enough.

Maybe Billy hadn't been wrong back on Parents' Day when he said Steve hadn't changed at all.

Hannah goes running through the house and up to her bedroom. She'd talked the whole drive about the toys she'd missed, had even brought a little backpack of things she intended to trade out so that she could bring some back to Steve's. He watches her go, wishes she wouldn't, considers going up after her so he's not left alone in the living room with his ex-wife--

The flowers are gently taken from his hands. He turns back to Colleen, watches her look down at the little bouquet with a small, soft smile. "Thank you, Steve," she says. She means it.

Steve's shoulders slump. His eyes feel damp. A small part of him wants to tell her everything he never did, to ask her to take him back, to say sorry.

"Happy Birthday," he says again.

Colleen goes into the kitchen, and he follows slowly, hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking. He watches her put the flowers into a glass vase and set them on her dinner table. There are drawings on the fridge that Hannah made last summer. There's pictures of Hannah everywhere.

"I have to admit, I didn't expect to see you," Colleen says, busying herself with tidying the already clean kitchen so that she doesn't have to look at him. He can't really blame her. It's hard for him to look at her too.

"I don't have to stay," Steve offers. "I can give you some money, and you and Hannah can go out and have a great time, and I can come

back..."

She looks up then. Hesitates just long enough for him to know she is briefly considering this.

"You don't have to do that," she finally says, but he knows that means that she sort of wishes he would.

"It's okay," he says, and he wonders how many times in his life he's said that when it's not true. "Um..."

"It's just--" There it is. The reason why, or the excuse. Either way, it's there. "It's just that... I've already been asked out for brunch."

"Oh. Uh... some friends of yours?"

Her eyes cut away. She leans her weight onto her left leg and her lips press together. He's learned her in the time they were together, so she doesn't have to tell him.

"You have a date," he answers for her.

"It's not all that serious. We've just had coffee together a couple of times. He and I work at the school together," Colleen says, like she's ashamed, like she didn't want Steve to know.

"Hey, that-- that's great," he says, and he tries to mean it. He thinks that he does. His feelings on the subject are complicated. "I'm happy for you, Col. Really."

She looks vaguely relieved in the way she used to when he'd tell her he was fine after a nightmare-- a look that shows she's trying very hard to mean it too. "I should've told you," she says. "You and Hannah deserve to know what's going on with me."

"It's okay," he says. "I haven't exactly... made myself available."

Her head tilts slightly, and she takes a step forward, and on her lips is the echo of the first words she ever said to him.

"You okay?"

Steve sags, and she nods to a chair, and they sit across from each other like they had so many breakfasts ago. "It's been a weird couple of months," he offers. "Not... not *bad* weird. Just... yeah."

"What's going on?" she asks, curious. "Hannah's as happy as I've ever seen her. I wasn't sure she'd adjust to the move, but she seems to be doing well in Hawkins."

"She's made a really good friend," Steve says, a fond smile finding its way to his face at the thought of Katie and her smile just like her dad's. "A lot of good friends, actually. I've had a lot of help from everyone."

"I'm glad, Steve. I was hoping going back home would help you."

A part of him wants to get defensive, to say he didn't need any *help* , but he knows deep down that he did. Even still, it's like pulling teeth to get him to accept that help even when it's offered, even when he *knows* that he needs it.

Her fingers drum on the table. Steve wants to take her hand. He thinks she might want to do the same.

Neither of them make the move to do so.

"So... if it's not *bad* weird," she says, "how have things been? Are you seeing anyone?"

Steve laughs a little, both because it's absurd to be hearing such a question from his ex, but also because how is he supposed to answer that? *I'm not seeing anyone because I'm in love but I can't tell him because so many fucking reasons ?*

"No," he says. "I'm not uh... I'm not seeing anyone."

"I'm a little surprised," she says, sitting up a tad straighter. "I thought for sure you must have been."

"Why's that?"

"You seem... I don't know... *warmer* . You've got that look about you, the one..."

Steve knows it even though she doesn't say it.

The one you used to get around me.

Shit.

...and it's not like he can't lie to her. The marriage fell apart because of one too many "I'm Fines". He can absolutely lie, or pull his even more refined move of saying nothing at all, but...

He misses her.

He misses her advice. He misses her telling him it's going to be okay, even when it isn't.

He misses the fact that she *never* lied to him, not once.

"I... I might be in love with someone," he confesses, staring at his hands, and now he's the one who feels ashamed, "in love with someone I can't have."

He can't look at her face. He clenches and unclenches his fists. He'd hoped he'd feel better since he at least said it out loud. He doesn't.

"Oh, Steve..." she says softly, and *fuck*, he wants to cry and he can't right now. He wants her comfort, maybe even needs it, but he can't take it from her anymore. He's taken enough from her as it is.

"It's fine," he says, and he catches her flinching out of instinct over the one F-word she can't stand more than anything. "It'll... pass. I'll get over it."

He knows that's *bullshit*. He knows because the word *bullshit* still makes him feel small and insignificant, and because he's sitting here at his ex-wife's breakfast table and wishing it belonged to both of them still even though his heart's wandered off to someone else. He wants everything love has to offer him, and he's never satisfied, even though he's never been willing to hand over enough of himself for it to be fair.

He's awful and selfish like that.

He rubs his eyes. He's suddenly so tired. He wants to go home, but it's too far. He'd just have to turn around and come back. He knows Hannah could stay the night, but he's not sure he's ready to be alone right now.

Fuck.

Either way he's screwed.

"So," Colleen tries, "you uh... you wanna tell me about them?"

"Katie's dad," is all Steve says. Colleen knows about Katie from Hannah's phone conversations with her. He's not sure if she knows about--

"Billy?"

Steve jolts. Okay, maybe Hannah's told her about him too.

"Uh... yeah."

"Hannah told me about him a little while ago. Said you let her stay with them when you went to see Dustin's show and he let her call him by his first name. She thought it was cool. She said she was so happy that Daddy had a friend too."

Steve lets out a watery laugh, drops his forehead into his hands. "She's such a good kid. She must get it from you because I keep doing this stupid, selfish stuff, and she's so smart and selfless--"

"*Steve*," Colleen stresses, and he meets her gaze for the first time in several minutes. "How much have you slept the last couple of days?"

He doesn't answer.

"Not enough," she says in the way that she always did when it wasn't something up for debate.

"Never enough," he snorts, but he can't find enough humor in it. The nightmares have been especially bad since he realized how much he loved Billy and Katie. His mind seems to get a lot of joy out of torturing the people he loves the most.

“Do you wanna lay down for a little while?”

“No... no,” he sighs. “I’m f... I can deal with it. I’m sorry.”

“Steve, please... don’t apologize,” she says, and she sounds a little tired, a little exasperated, but she’s trying not to. It seems all they do around each other is *try*. It’s something they got used to when they were struggling to make their marriage work, he supposes.

Steve looks at her, her soft gaze. She looks older than she used to. He can still see the college girl he fell in love with, but she isn’t her anymore. She’s an adult. He’s still the same stupid kid... but there’s something in her that’s still that girl, and he thinks he knows what it is. It’s the same thing that filters through her beautiful, bright home.

It’s the light inside of her. The light he’d never wanted to snuff out with the shadows of his past. It dawns on him then that that’s why he never told her, why he doesn’t tell her now, why he will never tell her. He’d let his darkness destroy his marriage, and there’s no getting it back, but he can’t let his darkness destroy *her*.

He doesn’t apologize for what he’s done because she’s already told him not to, but he is sorry. He’s so fucking *sorry*.

Dwelling on it though, letting it consume him... that’s just continuing to feed the beast, isn’t it?

“Why don’t you and Hannah spend some time together today?” Steve offers. “I can come back and get her tomorrow. She’s missed you, and I know you’ve missed her. You can uh... introduce her to your... your friend.”

Colleen’s brows lower in concern. “You don’t have to do that, Steve. I know you’re doing that because you feel guilty--”

“I’m not,” he says. “I just... I thought it’d be a nice thing to do. For you and Hannah. I can’t... I can’t fix what I’ve messed up, Col. I know that... but I can do better now.”

He thinks of Billy, thinks of how hard he tries, how hard he fights to be better, and Steve thinks that that’s part of why he loves him so much. Steve hasn’t tried hard enough. It’s always been easier to

pretend the problem isn't there, that he can just fake normal until normal shows up, but if Billy can do better, so can Steve.

...but Steve can't tell Colleen what happened. He still can't bring himself to muddy her clear, pure life, the one that doesn't know monsters exist, the one where the only demon she has in her life is him telling her he's fine when he isn't. He wants Hannah to grow up to be like her-- bright, glorious, pure, and full of love. He wants Hannah to be better than him. She already is.

"Steve," Colleen says, smiling sadly at him. "You say that like you've done so bad. You didn't. You and me... it would have been nice if we'd worked out. There was a time where I thought we would, and when we didn't, it was... hard. But... I'm okay. You're okay. It's all okay. We both made mistakes, not just you. So we couldn't make it work... I mean... we got a couple of laughs out of it, didn't we? And we sure as hell got the most wonderful little girl. I wouldn't look at that as messing up, y'know? You can't be so hard on yourself."

She reaches out and touches his face, and only when her thumb brushes across his cheekbone does he realize there are tears there.

"I would have loved to have been the person to make you happy, but I couldn't be. So... maybe Billy's that person. I don't know. I just don't want you to throw it all away because you think you don't deserve it. You deserve to be happy, Steve. You can let yourself be happy."

Steve wraps his hand around hers, presses his face into her palm. "I was happy with you," he says softly, closing his eyes to it.

She doesn't argue, but he can tell she doesn't fully believe him. For the first time, he's not sure he believes himself either. Ultimately, Colleen was just another opportunity to pretend to be normal.

"This is good, okay?" she says, voice small. "We can both do better. For Hannah and for ourselves. It's okay, Steve."

He sniffs, and she keeps stroking his face, wiping away his tears.

"I don't... I don't know how to be happy," he confesses. He feels like

it's the closest he's ever come to being truthful with her.

"I think... you'll know it when you find it," she says. "You just have to allow yourself to see it, okay?"

He nods. He doesn't know if he can do it, but he agrees.

"Go home, Steve. Take a night for yourself. Get some sleep. I'll bring Hannah home tomorrow, don't even worry about it."

Steve nods and manages a watery, "okay."

Colleen goes to him, wraps her arms around him, kisses the top of his head.

"You were always too good for me, Col," Steve says, smiling softly. "Not sure what you saw in me that day in the rain."

"I saw a good man," she says, "with a good heart... and great hair."

Steve laughs. It feels good, like something has shaken loose in him.

"You can be happy, Steve. Just let yourself do it."

"I'll... I'll try."

It's all he can do. It's all he's ever done.

He thinks... *hopes* ... this time, he'll actually succeed.

Author's Note:

i'm on [tumblr](#).